

# On Teaching the History of Nineteenth-Century Music

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The late author Ursula K. Le Guin once told an interviewer, "Don't shove me into your pigeonhole, where I don't fit, because I'm all over. My tentacles are coming out of the pigeonhole in all directions" (Wray 2018). If it could speak, nineteenth-century music might say the same ornery thing. We should listen—and resist forcing its composers, institutions, or works into rigid categories. At the same time, we have a responsibility to bring some order to what might seem an unmanageable segment of music history.

For many instructors and students, all bets are off when it comes to the nineteenth century. There is no longer a clear consistency of musical "style." Traditional generic boundaries get blurred, or sometimes erased. Berlioz calls his *Roméo et Juliette* a "dramatic symphony"; Chopin writes a *Polonaise-Fantaisie*. Smaller forms that had been marginal in earlier periods are elevated to unprecedented levels of sophistication by Schubert (lieder), Schumann (character pieces), and Liszt (etudes). Heightened national identity in many regions of the European continent resulted in musical characteristics which become more identifiable than any pan-geographic style in works by composers like Musorgsky or Smetana.

At the college level, music of the nineteenth century is taught as part of music history surveys, music appreciation courses, or (more rarely these days) as a stand-alone course. Before addressing specific aspects of nineteenth-century music we might want to explore with our students, I will present a bit of local and personal history. Up until the last fifteen or so years, the multi-semester music history sequence was almost universal as a requirement for music majors at liberal arts universities and colleges in the U.S. At Columbia, when I arrived to teach in the early 1980s, we had a four-semester sequence. The last course in that sequence, which I taught frequently, encompassed (as described in the Columbia College Bulletin) "Western music from the early 19th century to the mid 20th century." Covering so much material—in effect, most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—in one semester was daunting. Eventually recognizing this

situation, our department reframed the music history sequence in 1989 so that the third of the four semesters would cover “music of the classical and romantic periods: from Haydn and Mozart to the death of Wagner,” and the fourth “music of the modern period: Western music from the death of Wagner to the present.”

This arrangement still made for a lot of material to cover within two semesters. And as the years went on, of course, “the present” kept moving forward, making the last semester even more challenging to teach (and take). In 2003, bowing to reasonable pressures on the Columbia music major and concentration to include more options in music theory, composition, and non-Western and popular musics, the required music history survey was compressed to two semesters, where it remains today. The first semester covers Western music from the Middle Ages through Bach; the second begins with Haydn and Mozart and moves to the present.

The core of the Western standard repertory, from Beethoven to Chopin to Verdi, lies within the nineteenth century. Even—or perhaps especially—when it is reduced to a sliver of a few weeks or classes within a broader survey, as at Columbia, the nineteenth century needs careful curating. Which of its many tentacles demand our attention, and how do we prioritize them? As the author of a textbook about the period, *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (Frisch 2012), I have grappled with these questions. I will share here some thoughts on five topics: (1) the century’s chronological delimitations; (2) the elusive concept of Romanticism; (3) the career of Clara Wieck Schumann; (4) the possibilities of a global perspective; and finally, (5) a late piano piece by Brahms.

### Where Does It Begin and End?

The idea of the century as an experiential and historiographical unit is by no means universal. Some non-Western cultures have other markers for periodization. Hindu calendars are reckoned in sixty-year cycles; the Aztecs calibrated time in fifty-two-year groupings. There is even some lexical ambiguity in the West. The Latin term “saeculum” originally meant a period of time equivalent to a generation or an individual’s lifetime, but in Romance languages today, the cognate term (French, *siècle*; Italian, *secolo*; Spanish, *siglo*) has come to mean precisely 100 years, or a century.

For historians of Western culture and music, the century has been a tool at once conceptual and practical. Literally, the nineteenth century extends from 1801 through 1900. Those dates line up with significant musical events. Beethoven’s Symphony No. 1, published in 1801, was critical for the development of instrumental music across the next one hundred years. Puccini’s *Tosca*, which premiered in April 1900, marks the culmina-

tion of a grand Italian operatic tradition that had blossomed from Rossini through Verdi.

But the stylistic and technical dimensions of music—not to mention its cultural, social, and political contexts—will rarely coincide with the calendar. Some musicologists have adopted the notion of the “long” nineteenth century (made popular by the historian Eric Hobsbawm) bounded on either end by major events, the French Revolution of 1789 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, and punctuated in the middle by the revolutions of 1848. These dates also correlate with important shifts in music history. Mozart dies in Vienna in 1791, and the following year Beethoven moves to that city to begin what would be an illustrious career. In 1912–13, the concert world was shaken by the modernism of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire* and Stravinsky’s *Le sacre de printemps*. The late 1840s marked a significant moment with the deaths of Chopin and Mendelssohn and the emergence of Brahms and Wagner.

In my own history of nineteenth-century music, partly for practical reasons of space and partly to coordinate with adjacent books in the series, I opt for a “short” nineteenth century, which also has plausible musical and historical boundaries. I begin in about 1815, with the Congress of Vienna, when representatives of various European states and nations assembled to reconstruct the continent after the disruptions of the Napoleonic Wars. This is when Schubert arrives on the scene and Beethoven begins to retreat from public view. It is also a time when, broadly speaking, Enlightenment values give way to the more mundane priorities of Biedermeier, middle-class culture. *Music in the Nineteenth Century* concludes in the early 1890s, at a time when urbanization and industrialization are changing the cultural landscapes in both the U.S. and Europe, and when Richard Strauss, Puccini, Debussy, Ives, and Mahler are all emerging as major figures.

## Romanticism

Romanticism is the concept most often associated with the nineteenth century in music historical writing. Three major English-language textbook surveys do so explicitly in their titles: Alfred Einstein’s contribution to the first Norton history series, *Music in the Romantic Era* (Einstein 1947); Rey Longyear’s 1973 volume for the Prentice Hall series, *Nineteenth-Century Romanticism in Music* (Longyear 1973); and Leon Plantinga’s influential Norton textbook from 1985, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Plantinga 1985). The two multi-author volumes that cover the nineteenth century in the series “Music and Society” (1991) use Romanticism in their titles: *The Early Romantic Era: Between Revolutions, 1789 and 1848* (Ringer 1991) and *The Late Romantic Era: from*

*the Mid-19th Century to World War I* (Samson 1991).

These books are all classics (or should we say “romantics”?) of their kind and have served many hundreds of students over seventy years. Yet their framing of the entire nineteenth century as Romantic is problematic. In my view, Romanticism is better suited and especially relevant to the first half of the nineteenth century, after which it is displaced or overtaken by other “-isms” or movements.

Romanticism developed mainly in Germany in the late eighteenth century, as a philosophy or worldview that reacted against the values seen to derive from classical antiquity. These classical values included order, balance, and purity, as well as an emphasis on community and on the present, the here-and-now. The early Romantics emphasized subjectivity over objectivity, the individual over the community, the infinite rather than the finite, the imagination over reality, and “becoming” rather than “being.” Romantic writers often adopted a specifically Christian perspective as a counterforce to the polytheistic religions depicted in artworks from Ancient Greece and Rome. Some Romantics idealized indigenous folk culture, following Johann Gottfried Herder, who had argued that folk poetry, rather than art forms based on ancient classical models, best expressed the purest essence of a national culture. Collections of folk poetry, folk tales, and folk tunes began to appear frequently in the early nineteenth century.

Many composers in the decades after 1800 absorbed these ideas, including Beethoven, who read Romantic literature in the last decade of his life; Schubert, who adopted the tuneful folk style in many of his songs; Schumann, who based many of his compositions on German Romantic fiction and poetry; and Berlioz, who absorbed the French Romanticism of François-René de Chateaubriand and Victor Hugo. But by the late 1840s, Romanticism fades as a major phenomenon in ways that should be reflected in our teaching and writing about the nineteenth century.

I prefer to interpret the music of the nineteenth century in two halves, conveniently dividing at about the midpoint. The revolutions of 1848 in different parts of Europe, in which various populations rose up unsuccessfully against authoritarian rule, could be said to be as important in ushering out Romanticism as the French Revolution and its aftermath were in bringing it into being. Romanticism was now seen as too inward and self-indulgent, associated with passive or escapist behavior in an era that required active engagement. “The political gravity of the present situation has dealt a serious blow to Romanticism,” wrote one German music critic in 1848. “The time for dreams is past” (Frisch 2012, 114).

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, in the context of this

set of attitudes, Romanticism is superseded by other perspectives, including materialism and realism. Writers as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche, Hermann Helmholtz, and Gustave Flaubert, and painters like Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet, place an emphasis on the everyday, physical, “phenomenal” world, rather than the ideal, metaphysical, or “noumenal” one. In our music history courses, we can reflect this shift in any number of ways. Brahms, who kept up with the scientific and historical writing of his day, adopts a grimmer, more pessimistic worldview. Strauss and Mahler make use of realistic effects like wind machines and cowbells. In the vocal and operatic music of Wolf and Musorgsky, singing becomes more natural and speech-like, with careful attention to declamation, often at the expense of more purely lyrical lines.

### The Case of Clara Wieck Schumann

All “-isms” remain ultimately abstract. Discussions of Romanticism in music tend to revolve around white men and their compositions. As such, Romanticism, even when supplemented by concepts like realism, remains an incomplete framework for what happens in nineteenth-century music, where everyday musical life in the nineteenth century was also directly affected by issues involving gender, class, and ethnicity. We can get at such topics with our students by considering the life and career of Clara Wieck Schumann (1819–1896), the wife and then widow of Robert Schumann. (I prefer to use both maiden and married names when referring to her alone, so as to avoid potential confusion with Robert.)

Wieck Schumann does not conform easily to conventional Romantic notions of subjectivity and imagination. Although her compositions, mostly piano pieces and lieder, share Romantic characteristics with those of her contemporaries, they shaped less of her identity than did her other activities. Wieck Schumann published fewer than two dozen opuses during her life. Most of the time, she juggled commitments as a hard-working professional pianist, who toured frequently, pioneered recitals focused on the Baroque and Classical composers, and was one of the first artists to play from memory; a prominent and admired piano pedagogue, some of whose students went on to major careers; a busy mother of (and often the breadwinner for) eight children, one of whom died at sixteen months and two of whom suffered severe lifelong medical problems and also predeceased her; and a devoted wife to Robert Schumann, whose work took precedence over hers both during his life and, to some extent, after his death, when she tirelessly promoted his compositions through performance and editions.

By most accounts, including their own, the Schumanns had a loving

marriage and a rewarding family life. But two-career relationships in which each partner had equal status were rare in the nineteenth century, and it was the male who usually won out. Framing Wieck Schumann within Romanticism (or any other “-ism”) is in many ways misleading; it tells only part of the story of what defined her life and of the activities that made her one of the most significant musical figures of the nineteenth century.

### A Global Nineteenth Century?

The case of Clara Wieck Schumann points up the limitations of the approaches many of us take when teaching and writing about nineteenth-century music. Those limitations—often dictated by time pressure and the overall curriculum into which our courses fit—involve a failure to consider not only gender, race, and class, but also geography. Did cultures in other parts of the world outside Europe and the United States think in terms of a “century” and care about where it began and ended? Did Romanticism, materialism, or realism appear elsewhere on the planet in any meaningful sense? These questions lead us to consider the concept of a global nineteenth century—how the era was perceived and experienced around the world, and how music was involved in these perceptions and experiences.

In recent years, some historians have attempted global accounts of the nineteenth century, most notably Christopher Bayley in *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (2004) and Jürgen Osterhammel in *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (2009, trans. 2014). Neither author takes a primarily narrative or chronological approach. Both seek to distance themselves from Eurocentrism and postcolonial perspectives that tend to frame the nineteenth century in terms of the West against (or over) the Other. They aim to make (as Bayley’s title implies) more even-handed and less value-laden comparisons and connections across many regions of the earth. Bayley explores what he calls growing “global uniformity” and “internationalism” in political, cultural, and social spheres. Osterhammel looks at broad themes like “cities,” “labor,” “living standards,” “knowledge,” and “religion.”

Bayley’s and Osterhammel’s are magisterial studies that only seasoned historians could have written. Given their particular professional expertise, it is not surprising—but it is disappointing—that they treat the arts with less depth than politics and society. Bayley devotes one chapter to the arts, in which his main focus is on uniformity and hybridity in literature and the visual arts (Bayley 2004, Ch. 10). Music does not make an appearance. Osterhammel leads off his book promisingly with a short segment on “The Nineteenth Century as Art Form: The Opera” (Osterhammel 2014, 5–7), in

which, to show the global spread of certain aesthetic practices, he discusses how, in the nineteenth century, European opera reached the United States, Asia, and Latin America. But the book contains no further discussion of the arts. And unusually for Osterhammel, this vignette imparts a whiff of hegemonic bias.

To my knowledge, no one has to date attempted the daunting task of a comprehensive global history of nineteenth-century music. An impression still prevails among many music scholars that understanding the wider world requires an ethnomusicological or comparative approach, while musicologists do “history,” which is more purely suited to—and, some believe, even an invention of—the West. But recent scholarship has begun to dismantle such dichotomies. In *The Cambridge History of World Music* (2013), thirty-five different contributors—musicologists and ethnomusicologists—explore the historical dimensions of musical practices and musical thought in many regions of the world and eras, including the nineteenth century. Individual studies by other scholars complement this work. Thus, even in the absence of a global history of nineteenth-century music, we have available resources that can bring a more global perspective into the classroom. I will briefly suggest ways in which such approaches could enrich our exploration of two topics central to the period, Italian opera and Romanticism.

Almost everyone teaches operas by Rossini and Bellini in the nineteenth-century survey. Most of us emphasize the stylistic and dramatic aspects of the *bel canto* style that would dominate the era. Some explore the rough-and-tumble business side of Italian opera (as I do in my textbook) with its cutthroat, profit-seeking impresarios, imperious singers demanding high salaries, and overworked composers writing on short deadlines for low pay. But with Benjamin Walton we could also shift our students’ gazes across the ocean to Latin America, specifically to Buenos Aires in Argentina. Here in the 1830s, the works of Rossini and Bellini were immensely popular, but took on what might seem, from the European perspective, surprising political associations. Rossini was celebrated for creating “the glorious music of the people,” in line with the populist dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Bellini was taken up by the opposition, a literary and political group called the Generation of 1837 that had absorbed many ideas of European Romanticism and celebrated Bellini’s otherworldly, more lyrical and contemplative style. Bellini’s music became known in Argentina not through live performance, but through excerpts printed in the Generation of 1837’s journal, which appealed to a small salon culture, while Rossini’s music was played by the military bands of Buenos Aires to accompany public parades and festivals (Walton 2012, 465–66).

And what of non-European music in this Latin American context? Bernardo Illari explores the role of the Argentine Gauchos, an ethnically mixed nomadic group of cattlemen that became renowned for their guitar-accompanied songs and their strong values of independence (Illari 2013). The music of this group would likely have been much admired in Western Europe, where, as we saw above, Romantics prized the apparently authentic simplicity of folk culture. But in Argentina, these ideals interacted with local cultures in a way that Illari calls “paradoxical Romanticism.” The Generation of 1837 absorbed many of the concepts of Romanticism, including some of Herder’s ideas about the folk. But this new urban, learned elite, who were largely in sympathy with the dictator Rosas, found the Gauchos and their music threatening. In their view, as described by Illari, the Gauchos were savages lacking “any nobility that could enable them to become the carriers of the deepest national sense” (Illari 2013, 384). The Gauchos became targets of Romantic criticism rather than subjects of praise.

When we teach Italian opera and Romanticism, most of us will maintain our primary focus on Western Europe. But we should allow time to explore with our students how such genres or concepts appear in other parts of the world. As the writings of Walton and Illari suggest, and as is clear from Bayley and Osterhammel, imperialism and colonialism tell only part of the story. As in the case of Argentina, they can be nuanced to reflect local histories and culture.

### An Intermezzo by Brahms

No matter how many classes or weeks are involved, any course that covers nineteenth-century music will devote some time to musical analysis. Looking in detail at carefully selected works helps ground the broader cultural or historical discussions. Thus, from the expanse of the globe, I will in conclusion narrow our focus to one short piano piece by Brahms. This is the *Intermezzo* in E minor, Op. 116, No. 5, from the group of seven pieces published in 1892. Brahms’s piece is an ideal candidate for close examination in a nineteenth-century survey, because it looks backward to the eighteenth-century and early Romanticism and forward to aspects of Modernism. One of the principal voices of Romanticism, Robert Schumann, saw Brahms as his true successor, while a pioneer of musical Modernism, Arnold Schoenberg, claimed Brahms as a genuine “progressive” (Schumann 1969; Schoenberg 2010).

The designation “intermezzo” dates back well before 1800. As used by composers in the nineteenth century it came to mean a short instrumental work that formed part of a larger whole—a sonata, symphony, or a



**Andante con grazia ed intimissimo sentimento**



**Example 1:** Johannes Brahms, Intermezzo Op. 116, No. 5, mm. 1–3.

collection of pieces. In Op. 116, as in so many instances, Brahms rethinks a tradition by grouping these works (which have various titles) into what one critic has called a “multipiece,” with distinct motivic, textural, and harmonic relationships among the different parts (see Dunsby 1983).

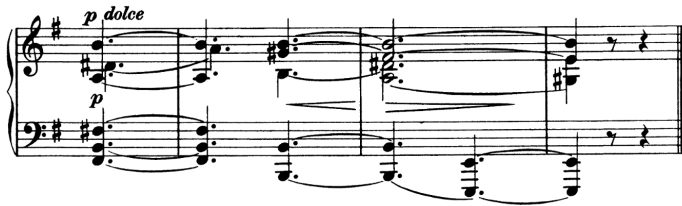
Like its title, other aspects of Brahms’s thirty-nine-measure Intermezzo reflect generic norms that reach back into the eighteenth century. It is in what is often called rounded or “recapitulating” binary form,  $||:A:||B\ A':||$ . The A section modulates to a secondary key, here the dominant, and is then repeated. The B section sustains the dominant, in this case over a long pedal, and leads back to the return of A, which closes in the tonic. This description could apply to countless shorter pieces written after the mid-eighteenth century, from Scarlatti onward.

Brahms’s Intermezzo also shares features of early Romanticism, as reflected in the character pieces of Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Chopin. These works are usually based on a single lyrical melody or memorable rhythmic figure; there is often a contrasting middle section. (An instructor could profitably ask students to compare one of the Intermezzi from Schumann’s Op. 4, composed in 1832, some sixty years earlier, with the E minor Intermezzo of Brahms’s Op. 116.) Brahms adopts but utterly transforms these principles. The entire Intermezzo is derived from a single rhythmic motive, a two-note, upbeat-to-downbeat figure in eighth notes, which is repeated continuously or with slight variations (Example 1).

This kind of thematic concentration or economy would become a hallmark of later music, especially of the Second Viennese School. Even more forward-looking are the kind of spatial symmetries exhibited by the music. The chord played by each hand in the first six measures is an exact mirror of the chord in the other: in the upbeat to the first measure, both hands play octaves that enclose thirds and sixths. None of these



Example 2: Johannes Brahms, Intermezzo Op. 116, No. 5, mm. 28–30.



Example 3: Johannes Brahms, Intermezzo Op. 116, No. 5, mm. 36–39.

sonorities is tonally ambiguous; each harmony can be analyzed in the key of E minor. But they all appear on weak beats and “resolve” to bare, two-note dissonances (including augmented fourths and diminished sevenths) on the downbeats.

Another unusual feature is the return at A' (Example 2). Brahms prepares the return to the tonic with a dominant-seventh chord sustained for four measures. But at the moment of reprise, he avoids E minor and shifts the original theme up a fourth, so that we begin on A minor. The rest of A' is recomposed such that the tonic is reached at the very last possible moment, with the root arriving on the weaker second half of the measure, under a dominant-seventh chord (Example 3). The rest of the tonic harmony, now E major, comes only on the subsequent downbeat. One could scarcely imagine a more attenuated cadence in tonal music. With this gesture—as with the piece that leads up to it—Brahms seems to be either weakly affirming or subtly undermining so many of the premises on which nineteenth century music was based. It is hard to say which; and therein lies the core of the Intermezzo's very modern ambiguity.

In analyzing a work like the Brahms Intermezzo, we are tempted to

get lost in the remarkable musical details. But it is equally rewarding to consider the broader context of the piece's creation. The Intermezzo is one of twenty-six short pieces that Brahms grouped into various opuses late in his career. They seem to have been intended by the composer for a liminal societal-musical sphere lying between public and private. At this point in his career Brahms was rarely concertizing; he played the late pieces almost exclusively for small gatherings at the homes of close friends. Of course, Brahms was famous, and professional pianists were eager to take up these works. But when they programmed the pieces in concerts in the 1890s and early 1900s, the blend of intimacy and complexity, such as we have seen in the E minor Intermezzo, often led to a puzzled reception among audiences and reviewers.

Two of the most perceptive critics of the day seemed to have grasped the paradoxical qualities of Brahms's pieces. Philip Spitta wrote to the composer that they "are really meant to be absorbed slowly in peace and solitude." Eduard Hanslick heard the late piano works as "monologues, which Brahms holds with himself and for himself in solitary evening hours" (Rich 2014, 102–103). Brahms neither confirmed nor denied such assertions. But it is worth investigating with our students the notion that some of the most beloved works of classical music, written by one of its most renowned composers, were perceived in their day as solipsistic utterances best suited for an audience of one (oneself). As removed as our students are from Brahms's day, they might relate to that idea as they listen to the Intermezzo on their smartphones with earbuds—intimately, privately.

Brahms's little Intermezzo reveals how a piece composed in the nineteenth century can have its own local historical-cultural-social milieu yet also reach back into the eighteenth century and forward into the twentieth, and even the twenty-first. When we teach music of the nineteenth century, we should always stress how contingent it is: it exists in our own time and place, but also in other eras, other worlds.

### **Brief Coda: In Defense of Music History**

The value of the music history survey has been in question for a number of years. In 2015, the *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* published a roundtable (based on a session held the prior year at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society) entitled "The End of the Undergraduate Music History Sequence?" (Roust 2015). In answering the question, the authors, all experienced instructors, took what might be considered relatively conservative positions, suggesting, for example, how survey courses could be modified to be less chronological, or how to help students navigate and assess the vast quantities of sources available in the informa-

tion age. More recently, some scholars have made a more radical appeal for the “decolonization” of music history courses and the de-emphasizing of the Western canon. They argue for a fundamental reshaping of our curricula to explore trans-historical and cross-cultural perspectives, as well as the social and political forces that keep canons in place (Madrid 2017, Vágnerová and García Molina 2018).

In the context of these discussions, Harvard, Cornell, and Vanderbilt have given up the required music history survey, substituting a range of elective courses that involve critical thinking, reading, and listening from both Western and non-Western perspectives. No doubt more universities and colleges will make, or already have made, similar changes; I cannot predict what will happen at Columbia in the years to come. For intellectual as well as practical reasons, the music history survey may not survive. There is no question that academic programs should evolve in response to the perspectives and skills we want our students to develop as music majors. The Western classical repertory of the nineteenth century can retain its value as a site of study, whether as part of a broader survey or not. The issues this era and its music raise—around periodization, labels and “-isms,” gender roles, global reach, and the ontology of individual works—are still relevant and relatable to other parts of our music curricula.

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